

Book Review

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Constructure: 100 years of the JAG building and its evolution of space and meaning

edited by T Murinik, 2015.

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One of the most topical debates in South Africa is the country's colonial past and specifically, the relevance of its colonial memorials, monuments, and institutions. One such institution is the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), which in 2010 celebrated the centenary of its Foundation Collection and in 2015, celebrated the centenary of its original Edwin Lutyens-designed building.

JAG's institutional history cannot be reviewed in the singular – its awe-inspiring foundation building, its stunning exhibition spaces, and vast art collection that it holds begs to be explored on multiple levels. JAG's physical locus, its relevance to the people that reside nearby (and further away – particularly its traditional middle- and upper-class patrons), and those who interact with it on a daily basis within the larger urban space that it occupies – Joubert Park in the CBD of Johannesburg – also provide a complex narrative that touches on many of the contentious issues implicated in the dominant narrative of #ColonialismMustFall rhetoric.

Historically speaking, JAG was the brainchild of the indomitable Florence Phillips, wife of Randlord Lionel Phillips – two leading cultural figures in Johannesburg's upper circles during the late 1800s to mid-1900s. The couple, according to art historian Jillian Carman (2006:55),¹ was determined to use their wealth and social influence 'to create an urban environment in which their social and cultural comforts could be accommodated, to provide "the amenities of life in Europe, which are almost entirely missing here" [Johannesburg]'. Thelma Gutsche's *No ordinary woman: The life and times of Florence Phillips* (1966)² and Carman's *Uplifting the*

1. Carman, J. 2006. *Uplifting the colonial philistine: Florence Phillips and the making of the Johannesburg Art Gallery*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

2. Gutsche, T. 1966. *No ordinary woman. The life and times of Florence Phillips*. Cape Town: Howard Timmins.



FIGURE N° 1



Cover and sample spread of *Constructure: 100 years of the JAG building and its evolution of space and meaning*. © JAG.

colonial philistine: Florence Phillips and the making of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (2006) provide insightful accounts of Florence Phillips's unrelenting pursuits to 'uplift the colonial philistines' by establishing, amongst others, a public art collection and gallery of modern European art in the dusty, yet fast-growing Johannesburg of the early 1900s, which was by then merely 30-years old.

A century later, JAG had accumulated one of Africa's finest and largest collections of modern international and Southern African art (but not exclusively modern, since its holdings also include artworks and artefacts from the Middle Ages from across the globe). Today, JAG is also the only public art institution in South Africa with a secured and substantial annual acquisition budget secured by a ZAR 6 million donation in 1984 by the Anglo American Centenary Trust (once again a Randlord patronage).

One of the flagship activities of the 2010 celebrations was the publication of *1910-2010: One hundred years of collecting* edited by Carman, featuring eight essays and hundreds of illustrations from JAG's vast holdings. This book, in its first chapters, reflect on the Gallery's historical collection strategies and activities that were mainly influenced by Hugh Lane, an Anglo-Irish art dealer who, with the patronage of Florence Phillips, was responsible for the curation of the Foundation Collection. The latter chapters of this book touch on the Gallery's endeavours to become more focused on Southern Africa during the 1980s, and in the 1990s, almost exclusively focused on contemporary post-apartheid South Africa. Yet, the critical addressing of post-colonial issues were essentially cursory notes in most essays.

Five years later, in 2015, JAG celebrated the centenary of the original building (a designated national monument) designed by British architect, Edwin Lutyens. JAG commissioned Tracy Murinik, an independent art writer, curator, editor and filmmaker to edit its second centenary book *Constructure: 100 years of the JAG building and its evolution*. Murinik opted to present a very different and eclectic narrative than what Carman was commissioned to address five years earlier.

Constructure is not a book that merely celebrates the aesthetics and architectural merits of a beautiful historical monument, but rather uses the building as an anchor to explore a diversity of ideological constructs. To ensure that the narrative is multilayered, Murinik invited more than 25 contributors to explore the often-contested confluence of history; ideology; art; and cultural, public and urban spaces.

In her introduction, Murinik (2015:11) explains the editorial strategy of the book:

Before a building exists as a structure, it exists as a series of ideas – a confluence of needs, desires, imaginings, beliefs and intentions expressed by those who commission the project ... Embedded in these expressions ... are distinguishing traces of who all those individuals are – the ethos of their time period, their identities and identifications – aesthetic, ideological.

This led her to include the neologism, 'constructure', in the book's title to stress these complexities and '... to draw attention to the often misconstrued perception of a built space being a simply benign vessel for whatever happens to take place inside it ... and where the construction of that space may be read ... to include a history of its surrounding context, its patrons and its audiences' (Murinik 2015:11).



FIGURE N° 2



Section one, Historical Overview. © JAG.

This 200-page book consists of four sections: Historical Overview, Selected Exhibitions, New Engagements/Shifting Boundaries, and Changing Visions. It includes 24 essays ranging from long academic discourses on a diversity of intellectual topics to short personal retrospections dealing with selected projects and experiences. It concludes with a transcript of an insightful closed session discussion on the future of JAG. The book is richly illustrated with more than 400 photographs that document how JAG served and interacted with its audiences and how it responded to its ever-changing urban and societal surroundings over the past 10 decades. *Constructure* starts with the past and concludes with a look at the future.

The first section, Historical Overview, consists of two essays: 'Lutyens in Joubert Park' by Jillian Carman and 'Materialising identity, class and "respectability": Joubert Park, Johannesburg as a leisure space, c 1890s-1930' by Louis Grundlingh. This section concludes with an insightful chronology of JAG's history spanning from 1886-2015.

Carman provides a detailed account of the origins of JAG and the architectural history of the original Lutyens building and how it developed and expanded over a century. The essay alludes to the underlying desires and 'internationalist' (and colonial) aspirations of the key players – Florence and Lionel Phillips, other Johannesburg Randlords, the City's mayor, curator Hugh Lane, and most importantly architect Edwin Lutyens – to drive the development and construction of the art gallery. Collectively, they (but more specifically Lutyens) also envisioned grand plans for JAGs surrounding areas based on the concept of the 'City Beautiful' – an international movement of that time that focused on grand urban planning. Murinik (2015:12) states that '[t]he implications of these desires and aspirations inform the beginnings of JAG's story, contextualising its establishment as a part of a colonial project and vision, as well as fulfilling the desires and personal motivations of the various people involved.'

Grundlingh's following essay describes the history of JAG's home, Joubert Park, from c 1890s to 1930. It focuses on how the Park became a key leisure site and a 'significant spatial marker' of changes to the young Johannesburg's developing sense of identity, especially in the period when governance shifted from the ZAR [South African Republic] to a British governmental system after the South African War of 1899-1902. Grundlingh (2015:34) traces the impact of this legacy and the steps that the Johannesburg City Council took to 'create and give material form to Victorian and Edwardian concepts of identity, class and "respectability", decisions that ultimately shaped the 'civic and cultural life of class- and racially divided city'.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Section two, Selected Exhibitions. © JAG.

The second section of *Constructure*, Selected Exhibitions, starts with a historical list of more than 700 exhibitions hosted by JAG over a century, compiled mainly from the JAG Library's archives. This vast (yet incomplete) list provides an intriguing narrative subtext of the constantly shifting focus of JAG's collecting policies, curatorial strategies, as well as shifts in demographic representation of artists, genres and audiences over time. This section features seven essays that critically explore selected seminal exhibitions, mainly from the past 30 years.

Same Mdluli's (pp 90-93) essay, '*The Neglected Tradition: Towards a new history of South African art (1930-1988)*', explores the historical significance of this groundbreaking exhibition in 1988, which almost exclusively featured black South African artists hosted by a major South African public art institution – a first of its kind – and opened the doors to exploring political and representational redress at JAG and other public institutions. Other essays in this section of the book are Julia Charlton's account of the exhibition *Outside Inside*; Clive Kellner's 'The grammar of the exhibition, biography of a building and a phone call', which speaks to exhibition-making as a self-consciously authorial act – of exhibitions as text; Terry Kurgan and Jo Ractliffe's '*Johannesburg Circa Now*', Antoinette Murdoch's '*Off the beaten path: women, violence and art*', John Fleetwood's '*Urban Life*' and Stephen Hobbs' 'Snagging at the joints'.

The third section, New Engagements/Shifting Boundaries, according to Murinik (2015:12)

... looks to JAG's contemporary strategies and responsibilities of making itself relevant – both in terms of its collections and exhibitions policies, and critically in terms of engaging its physical position in the inner city – in relation to Joubert Park, the area's daily residents, its audiences (existing, once-existing, and still desired) and its self-definition as a museum and cultural educational institution in post-apartheid South Africa.

This section features eight essays of variable length and depth of discussion. These include: Nontobeko Ntombela's 'Curatorial as education: A few notes on the role of education within the context of a museum', Philippa van Straaten's 'JAG's traditional collection: constructing meaning', Dorothee Kreutzfeldt and Jo Ractliffe's 'Joubert Park project 2000-2001', Usha Seejarim's 'The green fence', Musha Neluheni's 'New engagements – old strategies', Reshma Chhiba's 'Shifting spaces, publics and audiences', long-time JAG volunteer guide Lorraine Deift's 'Lapeng crèche' and finally, JAG's librarian, Jo Burger's essay on 'JAG Library and archives'.



FIGURE N° 4



Section three, New Engagements/Shifting Boundaries. © JAG.

Muririk (2015:12) states:

... The[se] essays critically consider JAG's role as a space of education, which ... Ntombela ... incisively [posits as] ... the need for education to be "an active tool towards addressing issues of past imbalances through the museum's collecting and display strategies", and for education to be a central facet of curatorial production within the museum context. Pointing out that an institution like JAG "remains a paradox in a place that is fast rejecting its relevance and reasons for existing (whether politically, financially or ideologically)", she asks the question, "how can art collections help us pose questions of new histories and new modalities of display towards better serving its increasingly complex society?"

The last section of *Constructure*, Changing Visions, deals with the institutional visions of five living JAG Directors/Chief Curators who have lead the institution since the mid-1960s. These are Nel Erasmus, Christopher Till, Rochelle Keene, Clive Kellner and Antoinette Murdoch, as well as texts by selected current and previous members of the Johannesburg Art Gallery Committee, Bongi Dhlomo-Maulao and David Koloane.

Constructure then continues with an edited transcript of a frank closed conversation, Collective Vision, held amongst several members of the Johannesburg arts community who are, or have been, involved with or invested in the practices of JAG over the years. Muririk (2015:186) explains that:

The conversation was held in acknowledgement of the fact that JAG in many ways is, and always has been a contradictory space – built and having evolved in an ideologically contradictory and violent city and country, to mean contradictory things to various inhabitants of the city over the past century – despite many engaged and successful moments in the Gallery, especially over the past two to three decades, that have purposefully challenged those contradictions.

While reviewing this book, I realised that it should not be read or studied in isolation, but rather as a continuation of those publications that preceded it; it makes sense to understand the intricate tapestry and the confluence of critical engagements of complex historical, societal changes and cultural politics that encapsulate JAG's complex and 'constructed' story.



FIGURE N° 5



Section four, Changing Visions. © JAG.



FIGURE **Nº 6**



Concluding images featuring JAG's vast collection in storage (left), and Edwin Lutyens' original drawings of the JAG building (right). © JAG.

Today, JAG is the only public art institution in South Africa with a secured annual acquisition budget. This allows JAG to collect new works even though the institution's spaces are only able to exhibit around 10% of its holdings at any time due to spatial limitations, which is obviously a great contradiction. The collection keeps on growing but ironically, the exhibition and storage spaces are no longer able to effectively accommodate the vast holdings. This also applies to the staffing and upkeep requirements for such a large collection housed in a historical edifice (physically and ideologically), which in recent years have become a great concern to many stakeholders because its locus in Joubert Park and greater Braamfontein is so vastly different from what Florence Phillips envisioned a century ago.

This book provides a resource that critically investigates a complex (yet not totally inclusive – as the editor stated from the outset) narrative that touches on many of the contentious issues implicated in the dominant narrative of #ColonialismMustFall rhetoric and what needs to follow.